

Angels Come To Us Disguised by edgy_fluffball

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Summary:

It's a quiet night in Hawkins. That is, until Chief Hopper receives news he would have been able to live without.

What follows is the worst night on call he can imagine once Billy Hargrove and Steve Harrington get involved.

Angels Come To Us Disguised

Author's Note:

This is my second contribution to @flippyspoon's playing card challenge on tumblr.

This time I drew:

Queen of Diamonds – Drama with a letter or Billy's earring

4 of Hearts - Hopper

5 of clubs – the quarry

I actually decided to involve my third character as the focal point of the story.

Have fun!

I'm edgy-fluffball on tumblr.

It is a quiet night in Hawkins, no-one wants to spoil December 30th for the rest of the town. People care about the calmness enveloping their houses, crave its security. It has become the Status Quo.

Men come home from work to the dinner the women cook for them, and their kids telling them about their school day whether they want to hear it or not. The last official buildings still lit up are the hospital and the police station, both occupied with the preparations for New Year's Eve. Hospital staff know that people will come in with burns of all degrees from early morning onwards so supplies are brought out of stock to be ready once it starts. It is the unspoken rule to prepare everything for the next shift taking over.

On the other side of town, Jim Hopper sits at his desk with a mug of coffee and the doughnut he smuggled past Florence in the morning. He has been trying to decide which files to take home for the last hour because he is on call and needs something to keep him from sleeping. He trusts nothing much will happen the night before New Year's. Ever since he arrested the Miller boy for disturbing the night time peace by lighting fireworks in the High School parking lot a few years back, everybody follows the rules.

Hopper gathers some files together and stuffs them into the bag he

keeps under his desk for moments like this; within two minutes he is ready to head home where Jane should be soundly asleep. On his way out he empties the mail basket and jams the two envelopes with his name on them into the bag as well. The bag itself is dumped onto the passenger seat once he reaches the car. He hums along the radio, they are still playing that Christmas charity song since people can still donate. Jane likes the song, he had heard her sing it, and her little friends had been over to sing it for her as a Christmas present a week prior.

The walkie-talkie cracks, 'Hop?'

'You're not in bed, kid?' he answers, trying to keep his smile out of his voice, 'I thought I'd get home to you sleeping. Over.'

'Couldn't. Too quiet. Over.'

'I'll be there in a few minutes, see you then. Over,' Hopper puts the walkie-talkie down as he pulls onto the track leading to his hut.

It is bone-chilling cold when he gets out of the car, the smell of snow is in the air. Jane is going to wake up to snow tomorrow, he thinks and allows himself to remember how he found her. There had been snow everywhere and she had been close to freezing, a bony, wild thing, trusting no-one. She is still wild but no longer bony or mistrusting; instead she is allowed to actually open the door and look outside the windows. Hopper crosses the threshold and smiles at her, standing in front of him, in her pyjamas already but scarily awake. He lets her hug him, she does it as part of their coming home-ritual now. It has been a day without visitors for her, Hopper doesn't ask if she radioed Mike again, that's for her to know and enjoy.

The rules have been relaxed a bit.

She goes to bed and he promises to be there when she wakes up in the morning, both of them know that she will wake him up because he cannot fall asleep so he works until he does. They know he might get called out because something happens against all odds. Hopper still promises because that is what is important about it, him meaning it. She has learned about things he cannot control and vague statements that he intends to keep but can't.

He sits on the sofa and unpacks the bag, arranges the files alphabetically, and looks at the envelopes. One is a slim, white one, probably a bill of sorts. He discards it without a further look. The other one, however, looks battered, almost as if it had been crumbled up in a ball before being pushed into the police station's mailbox. There are a few smudges on the paper, resembling fingerprints. Hopper frowns and opens the envelope.

I'm dying, I think. Can't be sure though, I'm no fucking doctor. Writing this hurts which means my hand is damaged as well. Never thought that would happen.

Hopper – I want you to find me. Please find my body and take care of it, I don't know what'd happen if he found me. The worst thing imaginable: there might be no body.

I never trusted you and right now I see how that was a mistake. In my defence, I have never trusted any cop. But you're no regular cop, are you? You got all those kids to trust you and they adore you. I guess you have six children. Harrington and you could either open a day care or start a family.

Harrington...don't show him this! The last thing I need is for him to drive off on his own, trying to find me. Knowing him, he would confront my old man and you know best what happens then – keep Hawkins from having to bury two misfits instead of one. Also, tell Harrington that I called him a pain in my ass a last time. Take tissues!

Who am I kidding, I'm writing this first, I might very well leave him a souvenir of his own, and he deserves it.

I should have trusted you, Hop, I'm sorry. Tell that to everybody who's willing to listen: I'm fucking sorry. For everything.

Tell Max I'm sorry for breaking her skateboard. I have a bit of money in a box in my room, she should use it to buy a new one.

Tell Sinclair to spit on my grave. God knows I deserve it.

Tell Wheeler and Byers that they are the coolest kids I know.

Tell Henderson to look out for Harrington, idiot will do something stupid, I can already feel it.

Tell that little girl of yours that she is awesome. I admire her strength. I wish I was like her.

Tell Harrington that I love he has to become a cop, like he told me he wanted to. I'm sorry I won't be around for him to arrest my ass like he promised me.

Please, Hopper, you have to do these things for me! You wouldn't want me to come back and haunt you!

My fingers are really cold now. It hurts. I hurt. All over. Please try to talk to my father. Tell him I'm sorry for being a good for nothing, disappointing fuck up. See, I can't even die like a man, instead I waste good paper and ink on this sappy thing.

Truth is, I'm scared out of my senses, Hop. I'm fucking scared and I am crying as I'm writing this. I can tell now, right? I'm dying and it scares me, I'm dying and it hurts. I can feel it but I didn't just want to go. I still have so many things to say.

Thank you for giving me a chance. Without you and Harrington, the kids would never have me come closer than fifty yards to them. The last two months have shown me that I can change, I'd hope to think I did.

Thank you for forcing me to apologize to Sinclair and Harrington. I didn't want it to be heartfelt but in the end it was.

I want to write so much more but I don't know how long I still have. I'm apologizing in advance for being a coward and not coming in but I don't want the police station's first aid kit and an ambulance. Once I have

delivered this letter I will try and find a nice and quiet place to die at. Just find my body.

Sincerely,

Billy Hargrove

Hopper feels his blood run cold. The hand holding the letter is shaking, making the piece of paper dance. Somethings stings in his eyes and it takes him a moment to realize that there are tears trying to form and roll down his cheeks. He wipes them away to look at the letter and envelope again. The smudges, he can see it now, are the result of bloody fingertips gripping the paper, the handwriting is uneven and scrawly, lines are breaking up, and Hopper doesn't want to imagine what pain the boy must have been in writing this.

He feels too much at once; there is fear for the boy who has written to him, left him some kind of farewell note before retreating like a hurt animal. Then anger bubbles up inside of him, anger towards Neil Hargrove who had told Hopper that Billy wouldn't suffer anything at home and that his aggressive behaviour was as unexplainable to him as to anybody else. There is another kind of anger as well, the one Hopper feels towards himself because how could he trust a man so composed, a man so much like his own father?

The last thing he feels is insecurity. What makes him the person Billy Hargrove writes to? Why him, and can he do anything? He wants to phone Powell to ask him when he last emptied the mailbox, maybe Florence knows something? He knows he has to do something, contemplates calling Steve Harrington, except Billy has asked him not to.

Can he do anything? He doesn't know if Billy Hargrove is dying, he doesn't know what injuries he is dealing with, he doesn't know when he received them, all he knows is that he wants to do something but *can't*.

He takes the phone, dials, waits.

'Powell,' he must have woken him up but Hopper doesn't care.

‘When did you last empty the mailbox today?’ no time for explanations, there is a boy dying or already dead, and Hopper feels his throat closing up.

‘Chief,’ Powell states, ‘it’s almost one in the morning. I’m too tired for –’

Hopper interrupts, ‘Life or death situation; when did you last empty the mailbox?’

‘Uhm, around eight? Before I went home,’ Powell yawns and Hopper hangs up.

At least five hours since Billy had posted his letter. Why hasn’t anyone told him there was something for the Chief? He could have found the boy by now. Hopper lets out a shaky breath, unsure what to do next. Again, he contemplates calling Steve Harrington.

A shrill cry has him standing on the tip toes. Jane is thrashing in her room, he can hear her pants and choked cries through the door. His attention shifts, he feels a second of regret because *Billy is dying and needs help*, but Jane is his little girl and her cries hurt him on a whole other level. He rushes towards her door and all but stumbles into the room.

‘Hey, kiddo! Wake up! Jane, what is the matter?’ he shakes her gently, trying to get her to open her eyes, ‘come on, kiddo!’

She wakes up with another gasp, her arms shooting out and grasping his arm. He reacts instinctively, holding her close and rocking her in his arms. She cuddles up against his chest, her breaths are still coming out erratic and Hopper can feel her delicate arms snaked around his neck. He wants to say something, anything but nothing comes out because in-between Billy’s letter and Jane’s nightmare he just hasn’t got the words.

‘Hop,’ Jane rests her face against his shoulder, a sob escapes her lips and she inhales deeply, ‘I saw – I saw Billy.’

Hopper wants to jump to his feet. Instead he holds her tighter and tries to soothe her, his nerves are acting up and he wants to press

into her until she gives him every detail about what she saw. But he knows she needs to come to him, it has to be her will. He can feel her grip loosen, then her hands on his cheeks. Jane looks up at him with a stern look that would make his skin crawl on every other day.

‘I could see Billy. He is hurt. Badly. He is hurting. And alone. He is afraid,’ Jane rubs his cheeks, ‘He is hurt and alone! You have to help him!’

‘And I will’, Hopper promises and stands up, massages his temples, and sighs, ‘Listen, kid, I really have to go and try and find him before – wait, can you –’

He interrupts himself because as desperate as he is already about the whole situation, the thing he was about to suggest is never an option. Jane looks back at him with her big eyes gleaming unflinchingly.

‘I look for him, you find him,’ Jane got up and pulled her sweater on, ‘One minute, and then you go.’

She takes the cloth she keeps by her bedside and binds it around her head. For a moment, Hopper doesn’t know whether he is relieved or anxious about the new development. Her head jerks as she looks for Billy, her hands cramp in her lap, and then another dry sob escapes her lips.

‘Billy,’ her hands move in a wave, seemingly stroking something, ‘don’t worry. I found you now. Hop is coming. You are going to be okay. You need to be strong. You are strong.’

Hopper wrings his hands, he feels like pacing but he knows he can’t do anything. Not yet, anyway, he reminds himself and exhales. If only he could take up the burden for his little girl. And Billy Hargrove, for that matter. Hell, even Steve Harrington would be a lot better off with Hopper taking on all his problems.

Jane takes off the blindfold and sets it aside, her hands shake and she seems close to tears.

‘You have to go. Billy needs you.’

‘You found him?’ Hopper feels himself cling to this ray of hope, at

least Jane knows where he is, 'Come on, kiddo, tell me! Where is he and how is he holding up!'

'He is alive. Barely. You have to go,' she yells and throws his winter jacket at him, 'the quarry, where they found wrong Will!'

Hopper swears. He uses words he had promised not to use in front of the kids, punches the wall and opens the door.

'Use the walkie-talkie,' he instructs Jane who hands him the keys, 'keep me updated. I will need your directions once I get there, knowing Billy he will not be lying there in plain sight.'

Jane gives a curt nod and closes the door behind him. Hopper doesn't look back to the hut, not today. He has to worry about more pressing issues than breaking a ritual. There is a life on the line, he reminds himself and steps on the gas. He backs out of the track, there is no place to turn around and he knows the track by heart after a year. It is just by sheer habit that he looks into the rear view mirror. A moment later he is relieved to have done it.

There is little more than a yard in between his jeep and the Beemer that had sped up the track. Hopper doesn't get the moment he so desperately needs to *breathe* because when he looks into the side mirror he sees Steve Harrington stomp towards him.

'Hopper, dammit! What the hell is going on?' the boy is furious, so much is apparent to Hopper, 'I'm freaking out right now, can't you see that? I am freaking out!'

The passenger door opens and Steve climbs in. One hand is clawing at his hair, messing it up in this distinct way Hopper knows means the boy is stressed out. Steve's other hand is balled up into a fist.

'I get home from the Henderson's and there is an envelope at the door,' Steve sounds choked up, 'In this envelope I find this! What does this mean, Hop?'

Unclenching his fist he shows a small, glinting object to Hopper. He swears again, but it's alright, he reminds himself, Steve is older than the other kids. Although he knows Steve wants him to say something

he just looks at the earring in the boy's palm. He recognises the dangly piece of metal, he cannot remember seeing Billy Hargrove without it. He thinks about the letter in his pocket and what Billy had written down.

'You have to listen to me carefully right now,' Hopper knows he's taking a risk but he rules that Steve deserves to know, 'I can't have you interrupting me, I can't have you freak out, and I can't have you questioning anything I do tonight. Have I made myself clear?

Steve nods. It's all Hopper needs, he pulls the letter from his pocket and hands it to Steve. As the boy begins to read he starts the car back up again. He gives himself five seconds before looking at Steve again. The boy is clutching the letter, eyes moving along the shaky lines. There is despair written in his face and he seems smaller than before.

When he speaks again, his voice is breathy and rough, 'Where is he? Do you know anything?'

'Jane sensed him. He's still alive, Steve. Focus on that, will you?'

'Where is he, Hop?' Steve sounds uneasy, 'You know, right?'

Hopper speeds down the road, 'The quarry.'

'You are kidding me, right? I know Hargrove is a drama queen but that is out of his game! Hop – he really thinks he's dying, he has written a farewell letter, and left me his earring! You might not know what this little thing means to him but let me tell you –'

'I get it, Steve, okay?' Hopper doesn't bother to brake before turning the next corner, 'Why, do you think, I am here with you? I want to help Billy Hargrove as much as you!'

Steve stays silent, leans back, and looks out of the window. It has started to snow, big soft snowflakes sink to the floor, finally justifying the bone-chilling cold that has lingered over Hawkins the whole day. Hopper wants to say something, but not for the first time this night his words are failing him. He concentrates on the road instead. Billy is important to Steve, just as Steve is important to Billy. Both Jane and Dustin have told him multiple times. He imagines Steve might

feel like he did when he lost his daughter.

When the quarry comes in sight, the road and ditches are covered in snow. Steve climbs in the back, ignoring Hopper's attempts to keep him in the front. In the rear view mirror he can see him gathering up items from the trunk, wrapping the first aid kit in a blanket, and taking off his jacket.

'He might be injured, Hop, have you thought about that?' Steve seems to go through any scenario imaginable in mere seconds.

'Yes, yes I have, Steve! Now sit down and wait until I have parked the damn car!'

Of course Steve doesn't wait. He jumps out of the car as soon as Hopper has slowed the car down just a bit. He must have found a flashlight in the boot because there is a ray of light wandering around, flittering over the snow. Hopper sighs and gets out of the car. He craves a cigarette, chocolate, or a piece of cake. But there is Steve Harrington, crawling into the undergrowth with the flashlight in his hand. His face mirrors the hard determination he knows from Billy and it motivates him to look around as well. The Camaro is parked off the path, half-way hidden between two trees, he walks closer and looks inside. In the flashlight beam he sees the glistening trace of blood on the driver's seat.

He turns away and lifts the walkie-talkie, 'You there, kid?'

'I'm here.'

'I need you to look for Billy again, kiddo. We are at the quarry but all I can see is his car,' Hopper stalks over towards that spot where Steve has crawled into the bushes.

Jane is quiet for a few minutes but Hopper doesn't worry. She has gotten a firm grip of her powers.

'He's off the road. At a tree. You are close, more to your left,' Jane sounds breathless.

Hopper looks over to Steve but the boy has heard Jane's directions. They work in silence, scanning yard by yard in the flashlight beams.

They move forward slowly through the snow, Hopper can hear the boy breathe fitfully, his knuckles are white from gripping the flashlight tightly, and his head whips around with every sound coming out of the woods. He wants to comfort Steve but at the same time he knows that the only thing that will actually comfort the boy is finding Billy Hargrove. So instead he concentrates on every little broken twiglet or sign he could possibly spot, indicating the presence of another person at the quarry that night.

It is Steve who finds Billy. From one moment to the next he breaks away from Hopper's side, making his way towards a shrub, and falls to his knees there. A moment later Hopper can see it too; the boy lies there, snow gathered in his lap, resting against a tree trunk. Steve is now all hovering hands, not daring to actually touch Billy, but longing to. Hopper feels the same rush, wants to help, to do anything. He clutches the walkie-talkie, Jane's voice drowned out. Billy Hargrove looks like he has fallen asleep, the face that has displayed raw anger so often, seems almost peaceful.

But it isn't right, with temperatures close to fifty-nine degrees he should not look peaceful – and on closer examination he doesn't. Hopper can see the bruises and cuts, there is drying blood on his cheeks and clothes. He wears a sweater, and Hopper just knows it's not Billy's. It's green, or it has been at least. There are bloodstains, big, dark blotches that want to make him retch. Billy is hurt underneath that sweater and it is enough to colour the snow as well. A thought crosses his mind, because how can Billy's blood not melt the snow?

Steve seems to think similarly, he finally touches Billy's face with shaking fingers and a sob lingers in the air between them as Steve holds on tight. Hopper doesn't dare to come closer.

'Billy,' Steve sounds broken, 'Billy please, wake up!'

His voice shakes as his thumbs move softly, stroking Billy's cheekbones and holding his jaw up. Hopper inhales sharply, he sees what Steve can't, or ignores: Billy's earlobe is torn, the earring Steve had received earlier ripped from his ear with raw violence.

Steve still holds Billy's hand up so Hopper is the one to drape the

blanket over Billy's lap, he wants to wrap him up more but doesn't dare to because he doesn't know where Billy is hurt. He lifts the walkie-talkie again.

'This is Chief Hopper, I need an ambulance down at the quarry, we have a teenager, multiple injuries and suspected hypothermia. Weak vitals so you better hurry up!' he knows he is curt and too close to being rude but he can't bring himself to care.

Next to him, Steve now rubs at whatever part of Billy's skin is exposed to warm it up. Hopper knows the boy is fighting tears so he lets him have his moment, they can't do anything, anyway, at least not without risking to hurt Billy even more.

A soft sound interrupts the silence over the quarry. At first, Hopper believes it to be Steve who finally gives in to the pain – but it's not, it is a pained groan, followed by a soft gasp, and that is Steve who almost stumbles back when Billy moves and opens his eyes just a bit.

Hopper sees the confusion in his eyes when he tries to actually see, what is going on.

'Steve?' his voice is raspy and dry, his words little more than a whisper, 'What – what –'

'Shh,' Steve presses his lips to Billy's fingers, making Hopper feel like he's intruding, 'we found you, Billy, help is on its way, you just have to hold on for a few more minutes!'

There are tears in Steve's eyes when he pulls the blanket up and holds Billy's hand tightly. The other boy looks at Steve with feverish eyes.

'I saw snow,' he squeezes out, every word seems to be a challenge, 'Real snow. I saw snow and I felt it. I knew that it couldn't be bad.'

Hopper frowns for a moment, Billy doesn't make any sense. He looks at Steve and the way his eyes are trained on the other boy, lips turning up in a smile. It's not a wide grin, just the slightest hint of hope. And then he realises Billy has never seen snow before since he had lived in Southern California and even Hawkins had been late to

get covered under the white blanket.

'I have seen snow,' Billy is repeating his words now, they come out quieter and Steve's hands are holding his tight, 'Snow...and you.'

A jolt goes through Steve, he bends forward, there is realisation lighting up his eyes, and his face twists with fear. Hopper kneels next to him because Billy's eyes are closing slowly, lids twitching in the attempt to stay open.

'Come on, Billy, we need you to stay awake! Don't give up now, the ambulance must be here any second,' Hopper feels his own desperation and a lump in his throat, he wants to cry and hide because in front of him lies a boy who hasn't even turned eighteen, and he was right, he is dying but neither Hopper nor Steve want to let him go.

'Billy, you can't do that,' Steve, in contrast to Hopper, has tears streaming down his cheeks, his eyes are red-rimmed already and Hopper thinks that he must have been crying for a little longer than he has seen it, 'Selfish bastard, don't leave me alone!'

Billy takes a breath, the sheer motion is choking him but he manages to squeeze Steve's hand nonetheless. There is the faintest of smiles in the corner of his mouth, and in this smile all the warmth and goodness Billy possesses is hidden, ready to comfort the two men kneeling next to him.

And then, with a finality that makes Hopper's ears ring, his eyes fall shut.

The ambulance arrives moments later. His feet are leaden as he stands up and walks up to the paramedics who jump out. He knows them, of course he does, he is the police chief after all and they work close together.

He tries to explain what happened but can't find the words, again they fail him and he is angry enough to punch a tree. He points to where Steve is still kneeling in the snow, one of Billy's hands in his and tears freezing in his eyelashes. The boy needs him there with him, there is no place for his own emotions over there, he knows that. He wipes at his eyes in secret, Steve mustn't see, Hopper is supposed to be the strong character. His thoughts are on the other side of the road but he needs this moment, he needs to be for himself for a few seconds.

Steve's face had not yet healed when he introduced Hopper to Billy Hargrove. He had called him a 'fellow student', maybe not knowing that the kids have told him about little Max's stepbrother, the ever angry Billy. Hopper had shaken Billy's hand, fingers just a bit too tight to show the boy he knows – but Billy had not even done as much as flinching. Back then, Hopper had known or at least sensed what is wrong with Billy. It had helped him to know that Steve is there to help the other boy, to forgive him his anger and make an effort, maybe being the first person who does.

Now he feels like he failed that poor boy. He should have looked into the Hargrove family, spoken with the father, and taken Billy out for a milkshake like he does with all of them when they are facing a problem. He has talked about nightmares, one year after the last demo-dog, about school grades, love, and the future. Yes, he had been surprised when Steve approached him, Steve who had started to hang out with Billy Hargrove to the point that Dustin had set up a milkshake date just to talk about how Steve never had time for him. Back then, Hopper had thought it to be none of his business, had not asked about it when Steve came to him but only talked about a possible career for the boy.

Now he regrets it. He should have sensed it, should have known that Steve has grown closer to the Hargrove boy. The way he still hovers

over him, almost disrupting the paramedic's work is enough for Hopper to finally see it. And he understands.

Another thought crosses his mind, a thought that makes him physically sick. A thought that only comes up because he wants to think of anything but Steve's swollen eyes and the way he hugs himself, rocking back and forth.

He has to call the Hargrove household.

Hopper cannot imagine what awaits him once he picks up the phone and dials, it might be Max answering and he doesn't know if he can hide the tragedy, the sadness from her. It could be her mother picking up the phone. Hopper has met her briefly, she was at the station once to pick up Max after he had given her a lift back from the cabin. A nice lady, busy worrying about her daughter. He doesn't know what she thinks of her step-son. And then there is the father. For a moment, Hopper wishes he would be the one he'll be speaking to. There is so much he wants to say to him. Although, he feels like he might go off, get emotional and inappropriate. He is Chief Jim Hopper, first and foremost. He can't allow his emotions to get the better of him. There are rules to follow, after all.

I have bad news, Mr. Hargrove. At approximately two o'clock this morning, your son Billy was found severely wounded at the quarry. He died shortly after an ambulance arrived there from internal bleeding and various injuries. His last minutes were spent in the company of Steve Harrington and myself, whom Billy contacted earlier today. I am sorry to inform you that there was nothing we could do for your son. He seemed content with his fate. I am sorry for your loss, please let me know if there is anything I can do for you –

It is at this point that Hopper forces himself to focus because he forgets about the most important aspect here. That's what he gets for losing himself in his thoughts when bigger things are happening. Hopper wipes at his eyes again, just to make sure. Steve needs him more than ever, now that the paramedics actually have lifted Billy onto a stretcher and carry him over to the ambulance.

There is no need of a death notification right now because Billy is still alive, he reminds himself. He is alive and right now he is on his

way to the hospital where doctors will examine and help him.

Hopper turns around to where Steve is standing, now with the flashlight in his hand again. It is pointed towards the ground and he stands where the ambulance has been just moments ago. He looks lost and broken, younger than he is. Hopper feels a tug at his heart, he strides over and offers Steve a hug. He knows that Steve Harrington might be too old for hugs but he has just seen the worst thing imaginable and Hopper remembers how alone he felt after Sarah died.

Without saying as much as a word, Steve accepts. He is shaking all over when he allows him to envelope him, Hopper feels the weight of the boy's head on his shoulder immediately. As he pats his back and hair he thinks that Steve Harrington, who looks after so many kids selflessly and is of help whenever Hopper needs him, is nothing more than a kid himself. He has been robbed of so much that he cannot easily take anymore. For a moment, Hopper just hold him tight enough for the boy to rest against him, but then it is Steve who holds onto him closer.

'We've done everything in our power, kiddo,' Hopper tries to sound encouraging, 'now it's up to those doctors.'

He pauses and glances at the boy in his arms. Steve is obviously struggling to breathe so he rubs his back with more vigour and tries to ground him just that bit necessary to keep him from hyperventilating.

'Do you want to go to the hospital? I'll give you a lift if you want, I'll even throw in a coffee or something like that.'

Steve's nod is barely visible to him but his setting off towards the police jeep is all Hopper needs. He climbs in the driver's seat and starts the car.

'Will you arrest Mr. Hargrove?' Steve is looking at him with big eyes, asking shortly before they reach the hospital.

'If Billy presses charges,' he knows how that sounds and by the looks of it, Steve knows too, 'it is up to him but with what we have seen

tonight it should be the best for everyone involved. It's still his father we are talking about and it won't be easy. Billy is going to need you, Steve.'

He has decided to take a shot in the dark. Steve leans against the passenger window and stares ahead. He looks exhausted, his eyes are swollen, and he is still shaking. Hopper tries to watch him out of the corner of his eye as he is driving. The kid is playing with something he is holding in one hand, rolling it with one finger of the other hand. It is only when the car is parked and they get out that Hopper realises that Steve still has Billy Hargrove's earring.

Having missed the opportunity to change out of his uniform proves handy when the nurse at the front desk offers to get them coffee while they wait for news about Billy. Steve uses the cup to warm his hands while Hopper downs its content immediately. He knows he can't avoid the phone call much longer and he dreads it. Delivering a death notification is bad enough but with Billy's background in mind he has to be careful what to say to whom and when to do it. He cannot arrest Neil Hargrove before Billy wakes up and he cannot forbid a father to enter his son's hospital room. At the same time he doesn't want to risk it. And then there is Steve. Hopper wants him to have the chance to see Billy, something he won't be allowed once family members are around.

A man in scrubs walks up to them and introduces himself as Doctor Webber.

'Mr. Hargrove is stable now, he might even wake up soon. He has lost a lot of blood, we had to do a blood transfusion but with a lot of rest and time to heal he should be as good as new. There was a lot of luck involved, no organs were harmed and no remaining damage is to be expected. Except for the scar, of course.'

'What scar?' Steve sits up, he spills the cold coffee over his legs but doesn't seem to notice.

Webber studies his face for a moment and frowns. Then he turns to Hopper, 'Keep him away from army knives, will you?'

Something cold is running down his spine and for a moment he

imagines Steve pouring his coffee down his back but of course he isn't. Instead it is the puzzle piece falling into place as he remembers Max mentioning her step-father being an ex-soldier who still upholds the discipline of the force at home. He knows Steve remembers it as well, and there it is again, the feeling of having failed someone who needed his protection. Hopper attempts to smile at Webber.

'Certainly. Now, Doctor Webber, will you have this young man brought to Mr. Hargrove? I need to talk to you – and make a phone call,' he gets up, ignoring Steve's shocked look, and waves a nurse over to take care of the boy.

He talks to Webber, mentions domestic violence and an ex-army father. The doc understands and allows him to use the phone at the nurse's station. His first call goes out to Powell, waking him again and instructing him to file a warrant for attempted murder.

'In Hawkins?' Powell asks and swears.

'Yes, in Hawkins,' Hopper knows he is too impatient to be handling this phone call, he tells Powell what to do and hangs up.

The next call is going out to the Hargrove household. He has thought about what to say to whoever might pick up the phone at four in the morning. This time, however, he seems lucky. The voice answering is that of Max's mother.

'Mrs. Hargrove? This is Jim Hopper. I need you to answer me with nothing but Yes or No, clear?'

'Yes.'

'Good. Is your husband home?'

'Yes.'

Hopper sighs, 'Is he asleep?'

'Yes.'

'Is Maxine asleep?'

There is a moment of silence. Just as Hopper feels the panic rise in his throat, she is back, 'No.'

Relief washes over him. He recollects himself and clears his throat.

'Please remember, nothing but Yes or No. I need you to come to the hospital. Can you take Maxine and come to the hospital?'

'Yes,' now her voice is shaking, Hopper can't tell whether she is crying or just overwhelmed.

'I'll be here, Mrs. Hargrove, I'll be waiting. See you in a bit.'

Hopper hangs up and has to sit down for a moment. This night is getting the better of him and he doesn't like it.

He drinks another two cups of coffee while he waits for Susan Hargrove and Max to arrive. When they do he has called Powell again to instruct him again, and paces in the waiting room. A nurse shows them in, Max is wearing pyjamas under a winter coat, Mrs. Hargrove looks as pale as the snow outside and both clutch at each other's hands.

'What is going on here, Chief?' Mrs Hargrove sounds composed and Hopper wonders if that comes with living with a man like her husband. Maybe she doesn't even know – but experience tells him she knows. She reacted too calm, didn't even try to ask questions.

'Is it about Billy?' Max pushes past her mother, 'Where is he? He wasn't in his room when Mom and I came back from the store. Have you found him? Is he here?'

Hopper nods, no use in sugar coating anything about the whole ordeal.

'He is here. They had to patch him up, he was severely injured. Stabbed. I found him after he left me a note. The doctors took care of him and now we're waiting for him to wake up.'

Max digs her fingernails into her palm, Hopper knows this coping mechanism of hers. He motions towards the chairs but she shakes her head, chin set. If it wasn't as it is he would laugh.

‘Why did you leave him alone? What if he wakes up and is all alone? He’ll freak out and – and –’

One year is a long time, Hopper thinks and allows himself a weak smile. Max has grown fond of her step-brother, no matter what she says.

‘Steve is with him now. I picked him up when he was setting out himself to look for Billy. I hope he meets your standards of people equipped to look after Billy?’

Max falters. Her whole skinny frame sinks, something replaces the anger in her eyes. Hopper needs a moment to recognise it as relief. She nods and sits down. Her mother has watched the moment between them but now she is all over him, asking what happened, if Billy is alright, if he needed surgery, whether he knows who did this to him – Hopper asks her to be patient, tells her that he wants to know as much as she does, but all the while he sees the unspoken truth in her eyes, sees that she already knows.

There is a moment to ask a woman whether her husband is abusing his son, but not before they are allowed to see Billy, awake or not, so Hopper shows them Billy’s room. Steve is nowhere to be seen, he concludes that the boy is already at the other’s bedside. He knocks and opens the door without waiting for an answer.

A moment later he wishes he had waited. Steve is at Billy’s side, literally. He sits next to him on the hospital bed, has taken off his shoes, and his head turned towards Billy. The boy is awake, still pale but alive and seemingly relaxed, his head is resting on Steve’s shoulder and both are whispering, lips almost touching. Hopper feels the warmth of a blush on his cheeks because after everything he has gone through that night, this is what finally gets him. The intimacy with which Steve holds Billy close, careful not to touch the side where the bloodstains were when they found him, careful to assure Billy of his presence, and with something in his eyes that makes Hopper choke up again, but this time it is relief that washes over him.

Max and Mrs. Hargrove enter the room as well and the woman even opens her mouth to say something but the two boys on the narrow

bed do not hear or see either of them, so much is clear. Max turns around after a moment of looking at them, and the way she hides her face suggests to Hopper that she is crying. He clears his throat and gets their attention, eventually.

Billy tries to smirk but all he manages is a soft smile, too exhausted to sass or snarl. His fingers are tangled in Steve's sweater and Hopper sees that he is holding on as tight as he can. There are shadows under his eyes and bandages all over his face, his ear is taped, and his hair is a mess but it is Billy, alive and well, nodding at Hopper.

For a moment the room is silent, then Billy looks back between Steve and Hopper, 'So, Hop, I see you decided to ignore my heart-felt farewell letter and brought both Steve to me and me to life again?'

Hopper barks out a laugh, relieved to hear Billy joke already. He crosses the room, there are things he needs to say – but the words fail him once again. This time, however, it doesn't bother him, he pats Billy on the back who is busy watching Steve's every move with a newfound marvel only explainable by his recent experience and the expectation to not see him ever again. Hopper retreats with Mrs. Hargrove because he is still on call, after all, and there are things that need to be discussed and a report is to be filed. He looks back once more. Max is curled up in the visitor's chair, soundly asleep. Steve and Billy, however, are wide awake. He has a feeling like they might pass out from exhaustion eventually, but they seem to have so much to tell each other and looks to exchange it might keep them up for a bit longer. Just as the door closes, Hopper sees Billy lift his head to press his lips to Steve's in a soft confirmation of each other's presence.

The night is almost over, it's New Year's and Chief Jim Hopper feels that he has done a good deed. He still has Billy's letter in his pocket. Time will tell what to do with it, Billy might want it back or Steve might demand it as a reminder for their darkest hour, but right now Hopper feels it burn through the fabric of his shirt, a motivator he will come to need, something that makes him remember how scared Billy was of losing Steve, of losing himself even if the tough guy might reappear once he is healed. Hopper is determined to get the boys the justice they deserve.

On the other side of Hawkins, Neil Hargrove wakes up to Police Officer Powell knocking at his door, a warrant in his hand.